

PHOENIX--(BUSINESS WIRE)--Dec. 8, 2005--Kartchner Caverns State Park, one of the top 10 caves in the world due to the diversity of its calcite formations, will now be easier to book for your next family vacation to Arizona.

The Arizona State Parks department has implemented a real-time innovative Internet cave reservation system at www.azparks.gov. Arizona's newest state park, which draws thousands of visitors to southeastern Arizona, still offers reservations by phone, but now new software makes it easier for worldwide visitors to book online.

"This is a big step for a small state agency, but Kartchner Caverns has two areas of the cave now open and we had to assist our international visitors who wanted to book tours in real time," said Executive Director Ken Travous. "The State Parks department controls ticket sales and offers streamlined customer service while reservationists help visitors plan around their other destinations such as Tombstone. We wanted to be sure visitors confirmed tours but also had firm travel plans before they drove to southeastern Arizona on extended vacations.

"Booking real-time tours on the Internet for any venue is a challenge, but we've completed testing with our vendor, Paciolan Inc., and are ready for the public to book three months in advance from our Web site," said Travous. There are also 100 walk-up cave tour tickets available each day at 7:30 a.m. at the gate.

The State Parks' online booking is expected to improve the efficiency of the Kartchner Caverns' reservation system dramatically. Gov. Janet Napolitano, who implemented an Efficiency Review initiative when she took office in 2003, applauded the new system. "The Kartchner Caverns' online registration will make it easier for Arizonans to plan trips to one of

our state's most beautiful natural treasures. It is also a great example of a government agency finding smarter, more efficient ways to serve the people of Arizona."

What is attracting visitors to southeastern Arizona is the opening of the vast new 1.7-acre "Big Room" with its jumbled masses of colossal boulders covered with colored flowstone. Ceilings are studded with stalactites and stalagmites jut from the floors. The room shimmers with brilliant red flowstone colored by traces of iron and pure white calcium carbonate formations. Traces of manganese create black, blue and purple formations. Microscopic quartz needles form "bird's nests" and "brushite moonmilk," which are all rare for caves. The Big Room closes during the summer to let the cave "rest and rejuvenate" and so cave myotis bats can roost.

The Kartchner Caverns Rotunda/Throne tour offers a kaleidoscope of color with 100-foot-high ceilings dripping with multihued stalactites while giant white columns dot the underground scene. Dainty white helictites, translucent orange bacon, and shields of white calcite adorn each crevice. An extraordinarily thin soda straw hangs tenuously 21 feet 2 inches down from the ceiling.

Book cave tours at www.azparks.gov or by calling 520-586-2283. Big Room tours are \$12.95 for children 7-13 and \$22.95 for adults, but no children 6 or under. The Rotunda/Throne Room tour is \$9.95 for children and \$18.95 for adults. Development tours are booked once a day. Camping in the 62 spaces at Kartchner Caverns State Park is \$22 with no reservations in advance.

For information about the Arizona State Parks department call 602-542-4174 or visit the Web site at www.azparks.gov.

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